



ISSN: 2321-8819 (Online) 2348-7186 (Print) Impact Factor: 1.498 Vol. 7, Issue 2, February, 2019

## Understanding How Romance Novels Shape Identities of Female Readers: A Transactional Reader-Response Approach

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### Abstract

Reading romance novels is one of the leisure activities among female readers across the globe. However, studies on female readers of Hausa romance novels remain unexplored. Therefore, this study was conducted to understand how the female readers in Nigeria conceptualise romance novels in shaping their identities. This study was guided by Transactional Reader-Response Theory. This qualitative research approach used face-to-face interviews to collect the data. A total of eight female readers were interviewed and their responses were recorded and then transcribed. Four themes emerged from the data: Aesthetics Reading Stances, Associating Oneself with the Events From the Story, Personal Understanding of the Story, and Happily Ever After. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on romance novels and Transactional Reader-Response Theory.

**Keywords:** Hausa romance novels, Female readers, Female identity, Transactional Reader-Response Theory.

### 1. Introduction

Literary texts are useful materials that can be used to improve learner's vocabulary development and critical thinking (Ahmad, 2012; Collie & Slater, 1987). Moreover, they help to improve the learners' cultural knowledge and communication skills. Lazar (1993) defined literature as the use of language to evoke a personal response in the hearts of every reader or listener. Literature has three broad genres: novel, poetry and drama. Among the genres of literary text, romance fiction is a type of literary genre which is commonly used to entertain its readers. Through novels, the readers are drawn to the development of the story whereby they experienced personal attachment with certain characters and might share certain emotions portrayed in the characters.

Many scholars have explored the use of romance novels (Moffitt, 1993) which is the most prominent genre read by young and adult female readers. Hausa popular literature is a contemporary literary prose fiction which is also known as Kano market

literature (KML) or *Littattafan Soyayya* (books of love), written in Hausa language and available in the northern part of Nigeria. These novels are integrated into the curriculum through the teaching of literature courses in tertiary institutions.

Researchers have discussed the role of the romance novels in enhancing female reading habits.

For example, Ross (1999) examined goal transactions of 194 engaged readers with texts and explored their aesthetic reading practices. The findings reported that the female readers who read romance novels for pleasure helped them to enhance their thinking skills. Roach (2010) also examined the role of romance reading practices. The result showed the relationship between reading habits and motivation.

The romance genre is one of the best selling genres in the global contexts such as the UK, Canada, the USA, France, Asia and Africa (Moffitt, 1993). The discovery of romance genres and the growth of reading practices have increased rapidly as more materials become available to their readers for leisure and entertainments (Fordham, 2014; Holmes, 2010; Radway, 1983). With this development of reading habits among the female readers, there is a need for more research to be done on romance genres written from languages other than English, particularly Hausa language which is one of the three major languages after Swahili in West African Countries (Adisa, 2015; Okoro, 2012). Therefore, this study was conducted to understand how the female readers conceptualise romance novels in shaping their identities. This study employed Transactional Reader-Response Theory to analyze the female readers' reading experiences and to understand their aesthetic stances (Cox & Many, 1992; Dugan, 1997; Kadir, Maasum, & Vengadasamy, 2012; Kadir, Maasum, & Vengadasamy, 2014; Purves, 1988). The theory is a literary critical theory developed and promoted by Rosenblatt (1978). It proposes that through reading a text, the reader acts as an active agent who expresses meaning through a



transaction/reading process of the individual's experiences and feelings. The relationship between the reader and the text is of great importance. The theory highlights the idea that the text itself does not exist without the role of the reader which resulted in two types of effect, that is, the 'aesthetic stance' (emotional) or 'efferent' (literal) effects.

There are many researchers who have discovered the significance of the transactional theory in teaching novels in the classroom contexts. However, the studies did not apply the Reader-Response Theory to Hausa romance novels. Therefore, this study employed the Reader-Response Theory to gain more insight into understanding the Hausa romance novels.

## 2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences of reading romance novels from female readers' perspectives. A total of eight readers were purposefully selected based on the number of years reading romance novels and becoming members of at least two readers clubs (Dawson, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The readers had reading experiences ranged from 2-5 years. Most of the them have a minimum teaching qualification, that is the National Certificate in Education (NCE) and a few have Diploma in English/Islamic studies. The researcher used pseudonym to explain the female readers' experiences. Table 1 displays the profiles of the participants in this study.

**Table 1. Profile of the Participants**

S/N	Readers	Qualification	Years of Reading Experience
1.	Zainab	NCE	4
2.	Husna	NCE	4
3.	Aisha	NCE	3
4.	Hauwa	NCE	3
5.	Sumayya	Diploma	2
6.	Bilkisu	Diploma	4
7.	Fatima	Diploma	3
8.	Rukayyat	NCE	2

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The researcher used Hausa as the language for the interviews. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed (Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012). Editing was done to the

transcriptions in order to make the readers' interpretations more comprehensible. The interview data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allows for careful analysis in developing coherent and distinctive themes. After reading and re-reading the transcripts bearing in mind the objective of the study, the researcher searched for emerging themes and related concepts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013).

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The objective of this study was to understand how the female readers conceptualise romance novels in shaping their identities. All the eight participants interviewed described themselves as romance readers.

The first main theme which emerged from this study was Aesthetics Reading Stances which means that the readers focused on the lived-through experiences they had or their relationship with the novels that they had read. For example, Zainab gave the following response:

As a reader of the romance genre offers me a fulfillment of a nice story of beautiful heroine that shows her concern to hero for love engagement from the beginning up to the end of the story will approach their parent for their marriage proposal. I like stories that take your mind off everyday matters. It is a way of escaping from everyday living so every reader wish to get an experiences of marital life before she get marry.

Zainab seems to use the novel as a way of identifying herself with love stories and marital life

that she will encounter later in her life. She has the experience of reading novels for four years,

enjoys the fantasy of love stories and tries to escape thinking about the day to day issues.

Similarly, Husna identifies herself with the heroine character in the romance novels. She said: Well being as a female reader and member of the reading romance club, I also enjoyed the novel because it portrays of women life was excellent. The story of the romance novel described women as independent, self reliance, very confident with great determination. I like to read a novel that tells us a story mixed up with love/empowerment were a heroine will focus on her studies at the



university to become a lawyer, nurse, banker when are she met with a strong and love caring hero who encouraged her to get a job in government/private organization before getting marriage. So as the ending of the story after they get marry and start a new life of happily family. I really appreciates this ending because as a young lady whenever I reach the position of getting marriage I will handle my hubby with love and care.

Husna has been reading romance novels for four years. She seems to admire and associate with the portrayal of women's life in the novels, especially empowerment and love in the heroine's character. She identifies herself with empowerment in terms of being independent, self reliance, and self confidence. Husna also identifies herself as a university student with the heroine's character in the novels with the hope of meeting her Prince Charming who gives empowerment to her.

Aisha also expressed her view in relation to the heroines in the novels. She said:

Well..... I have an experience of reading the romances novels for quite long it is just make me feel good to hear a story with reading identify the heroines struggle to attract the attention of her hero. The most interesting events in the story were the hero met his heroine and show his concen, kindness, no matter how difficult/obstacles the heroine faced before her dreams come to true. Everyone of us always willing to come across. We liked novels that let them escape. Because it is an escape, and we can dream. And pretend that it is our life. As a reader I'm able to escape the harsh world a few hours a day. It is a way of escaping from everyday living. I enjoy reading because it offers me a small everyday life and an interesting and amusing way to pass the time and feel happily ever.

Aishah has been a fan of romance novels for three years. She identifies herself with the heroine in the novel read who faced the challenges of getting the attention of the hero and considered successful when the hero showed his concern and kindness. She also admitted reading novels as a way of escapism from the reality of life. She enjoyed the fantasy portrayed in the novels.

Fatima shared her experience reading romance novels in terms of love and marriage. She uttered her response as:

Any female reader might hope that by marrying for love she would be connected to a man who would treat her well, but this was not assured. Women were still very limited in their choices and often victims in a society that gave them very little power to protect themselves. The new cultural value of marriage for love greatly contributed to the portrayal of courtship and marriage in the novels of women writers. Women writers also understood the difficult position of women within the marital state. They addressed both of these ideals within their writing, sharing their thoughts with their female readership.

Fatima has been reading romance novels for three years. She notices the change in the trend of focus in romance novels from arranged marriages to love before marriage which involves courtship. In addition, Fatima identifies herself to the ideal situations in the new novel writings which portray marital problems faced by women.

The second theme which emerged from the interview data was Associating Oneself with the Events From the Story such as the plot, setting, mood and characters since novels are written in a narrative form.

Hauwa who has been a member of romance readers clubs felt happy after reading the romance novels. She said:

I find it easy to make my choice of the novel to read during our clubs discussion, here and it is considered normal. But in doing so I have to know the story will end with happier mood. Every time I pick a novel to read at my convenient time. Always I like to hear the stories which the author tells the reader through the narrative technique on how a hero to agree to marry the heroine.

Hauwa has been a fan of romance novels for three years. She identified her identity with the main



characters in the novels. This statement goes in line with Radway (1991) who asserted that romance novels provide readers with the opportunity to experience the actions of caring and attention given to the heroine. Moreover, Radway opined that the content found in romance novels can shape the identities of its readers and portray the reality of life.

Sumayya explained her view on how she felt after reading the love stories as such:

In fact, to say something about my readership experiences and personal understanding of the nature/way how authors write the story describing a plot of their romance novels must be interesting on how to cool the mind/hearts of its readers even in the middle tells a difficult beginning, a beautiful girl and her handsome boyfriend come to see each other as emotional partners. The aspect of their relationship centrally focused to achieving a satisfying union that is to become a husband and wife beginning a new life.

In terms of reading practices, Sumayya has been reading romance novels for two years and is mesmerized with the beauty of the heroine. She finds that the plot and narrative structure make the story interesting. She could identify herself with stories about life before marriage.

The third theme emerged from the data was Personal Understanding of the Story which refers to how readers perceive the story and their feelings or sensation after reading the story.

Fatima has been reading romance novels for three years. She expressed her views as:

Any female reader might hope that by marrying for love she would be connected to a man who would treat her well, but this was not assured. Women were still very limited in their choices and often victims in a society that gave them very little power to protect themselves. Showing value of marriage for love greatly contributed to the portrayal of courtship and marriage in the novels of women writers. Women writers also understood the difficult position of women within the marital state. They addressed both of these ideals within their writing,

sharing their thoughts with their female readership.

Fatima envisions herself of getting married for love by going through courtship. She also mentions about lack of empowerment given to women.

Bilkisu expressed her views on reading romance novels as:

Despite the dynamic nature of readers personal feelings and ideas of reading the romance novels. My motivation as reader I always think of the popularity of some authors before I made my selection of which novel to be chose and read at my convenient time. Therefore, every female reader might hope that by thinking whom to look for love she would be connected to a gentleman who would treat her well, but this was not assured. Women were still very limited in their choices and often victims in a society that gave them very little power to protect themselves. The new cultural value of marriage for love greatly contributed to the portrayal of courtship and marriage in the novels of women writers. Women writers also understood the difficult position of women within the marital position. They address both of these ideals within novels they read and sharing their thoughts with their female readership.

Bilkisu has been a fan of romance novels for four years. Both Bilkisu and Fatima highlighted the issue of getting married for love, having courtship before marriage and lack of power given to women.

The fourth theme that emerged from this study was Happily Ever After which refers to the relationship of husband and wife living together forever. For example, Rukayyat expressed her views as:

My favourite novel that tells a story of beautiful heroine that get a good boyfriend who always shows his love and concern to her and adapted to any challenges they encountered before getting marriage proposal. I also like the story focus on the plot of love relationship to get marriage between a hero and heroine. I felt like I am the one getting marry.





All the eight participants shared the same view on Happily Ever After. Their responses revealed that reading romance novels provided them with the experience of the real events through the symbolic fantasy of the text such as the example above.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this study, four themes emerged from the interview data: a) Aesthetic Reading Stances - Zainab, Husna, Fatima and Aisha, b) Associating Oneself with the Events From the Story - Hauwa and Sumayya, c) Personal Understanding of the Story- Rukayyat and Bilkisu, d) Happily Ever After - Zainab, Husna, Fatima, Aisha, Hauwa, Sumayya, Rukayyat and Bilkisu.

This study has implications for reader-response theories and practice in showing how attention to the social-interaction practices of talk (such as

interviews) and text can reveal deeper understanding of female readers sharing their knowledge and aspirations in demonstrating the importance of their reading practices and identity construction.

The present study has explained how female readers conceptualise romance novels in shaping their identities underpinned by Rosenblatt's Transactional Reader-Response (Molinelli, 1995). This study considers females reading practices through reflections on their experiences, voice and interest. Future researchers may explore the role of other romance novels such as historical romance, erotic romance, inspirational romance, contemporary romance reading practices among female or male readers to obtain their ideas and views.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions For the Female Readers

1. How important are the stories written on female empowerment to enhance economic growth? Why?
2. What do you think about the cover page of the novels?
3. How do you describe the physical appearance of the female characters?
4. How do you compare the role of the heroine and her boyfriend?
5. Describe your experience reading novels.
6. How do you feel when you reach the end of the story? Does the story of the romance novel end with the couple living happily ever after?
7. Who is your favorite romance author? Why?